THE CONESTOGA WAGON OF PENNSYLVANIA

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AMONG American inventions the Conestoga wagon must forever be remembered with respect, for it was this wagon that serviced a rapidly settling western frontier. The area covering the state of Pennsylvania and extending to the whole of the Northwest Territory was promising land for free men and farmers. Men overflowed the old colonies and looked to the West — the Alleghenies. They came here and carved out farms from the forest and prospered. The promise of prosperity brought with it the need for supplies, equipment, markets, transportation. To satisfy these needs, Pennsylvania originated the pack-horse trade and the Conestoga horse and wagon. In the years to follow this simple beginning, the Conestoga was to become one of the greatest freight vehicles America has ever known.[1]

The Dutch farmers, who had moved into the fertile lands of Pennsylvania, cleared away the forests to settle down on large plots of land and to force their livelihood from the earth. In a few years with frugality, fertile lands, industrious ways, and hard work, these German farmers found relative prosperity. They were soon producing and manufacturing enough to be able to sell at a good market, but where? Over in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York were good markets for coal, grain and meat. Yet the farmers had a logistics problem to solve first: how could they transport their goods that far, fast enough? Certainly every farm had some type of cart or wagon to haul farm products. But something else, they knew, was needed for distant transportation to be profitable.

The answer to the problem was the Conestoga which was developed in and around Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1750. These heavy freight wagons were well suited for their tasks as were the heavy draft horses that pulled them. Both the horse and the wagon were named for the Conestoga Creek and area in Conestoga Township. Since land transportation was essential in early Pennsyl-

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1 Archer B. Hulbert, *The Paths of Inland Commerce* (New Haven, 1921), 53-57.

vania and the Conestoga wagon was used extensively, it became known as the "ship of inland commerce" and provided the chief means of carriage westward to Pittsburgh and the country beyond.[2]

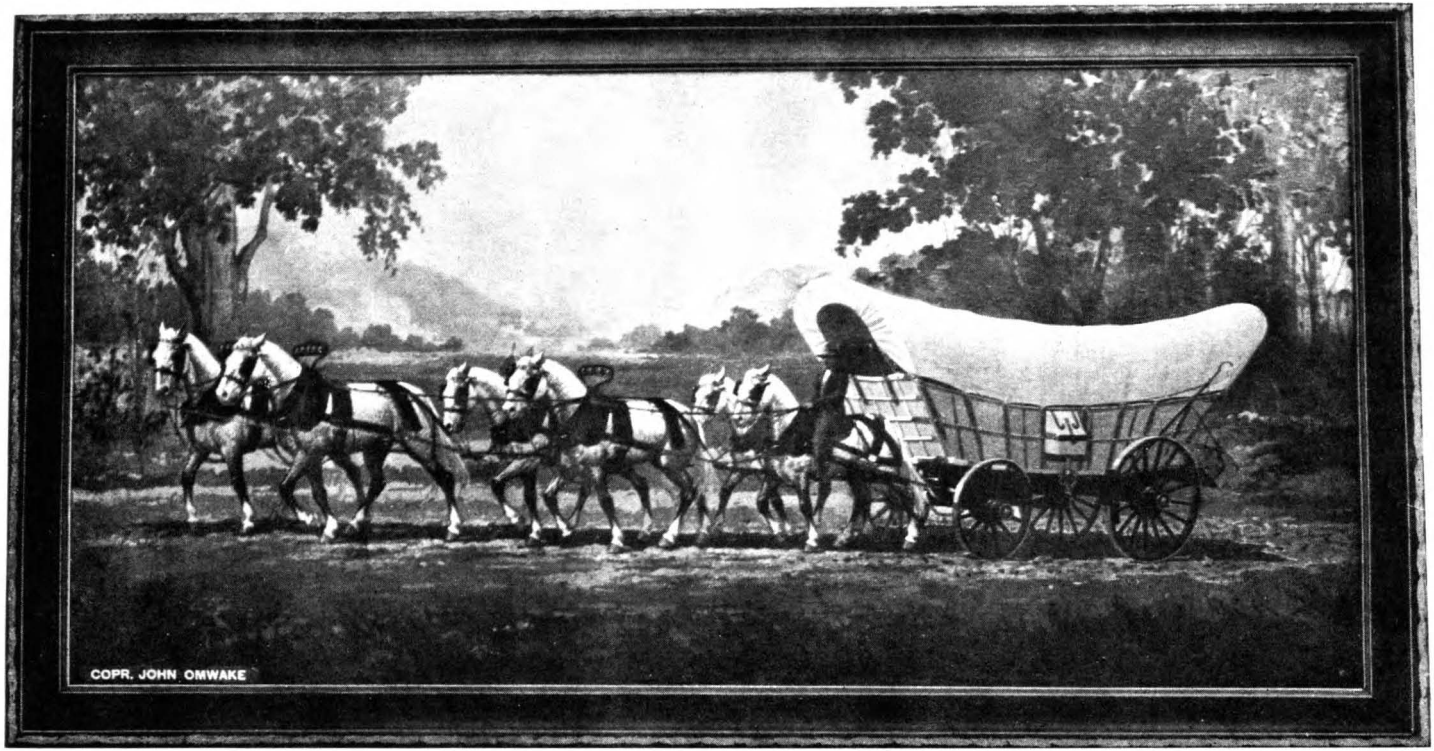
This "greatest of all American wagons" was an astonishing vehicle, finely designed and constructed for the job it had to do. Having no model like it in Europe, because of the pre-macadam American roads the wagon was boat-shaped with slanted ends both crosswise and lengthwise to form a sag in the middle of the bed, making certain that the load would settle toward the middle and bottom when it shifted in the climbing of the many hills and valleys of the Alleghenies. The Conestoga was built with high wheels so that its axle could clear the stumps and ford both mud and water. The back wheels were five and a half or six feet high with heavy oak rims, spokes of springy hickory, hubs of non-splitting gum, tires from five to eight inches wide.[3]

The typical Conestoga wagon body, made of seasoned white oak to meet hard use, measured sixteen feet between the front and rear ends of the wagon; width never exceeded four feet. Arched over the wagon body and reaching a height of as much as eleven feet from the ground were from six to twelve hickory bows. A canvas, or a stout white hempen cloth, was spread across these hoops and tied down at both sides with both ends overhanging open to keep out the rain or to permit the passage of air over the cargo or the passengers. This canvas stretched about twenty-four feet from front to back.[4]

True to the famous Pennsylvania Dutch flair for color, the Conestoga wagon was extensively painted. The wagon body was covered with a light but brilliant blue verging on peacock blue; the heavy wheels and all the running gear as well as the sideboards were vermilion; the ironwork was black; and the hempen homespun top was white. The leather reins and bridles were black but decorated with red ribbons and strings. There were fringed harnesses on the horses' collars ornamented with bells and chimes. Every small detail enhanced the picturesque quality of the spectacle: the wrought-iron toolbox on the left side of the wagon, the red bucket hanging beneath the wagon, the black tar-box, the blue feedbox and the red wagon jack.[5]

From the side of the wagon extended the "lazy board" of white oak strong enough to bear the wagoner's weight. Sitting on it, the

2 Edwin Tunis, *Frontier Living* (Cleveland, 1961), 71-72.
3 Frederic Klees, *The Pennsylvania Dutch* (New York, 1950), 226-227.
4 *The American Peoples Encyclopedia* (New York, 1963), VI, 28-29.
5 Klees, 227.



Recollection of the Conestoga six-horse bell team of Wesley Koons, Franklin County, Pennsylvania. Painted by E. R. Rollins for John Omwake.

driver could both manage the team and operate the brake. The Conestoga had sturdy brakes that bore against the tires when the driver or his helper held down a long, iron handle or "patent lock." The handle could be chained to lock the brakes for a long descent. Heavy brakes were needed to hold back six or eight tons of dead freight on an ungraded road. At the rear of the wagon hung a long wooden trough for feeding the animals. This box was taken from under the tailgate and placed on the wagon tongue and filled with grain which was kept in the wagon.[6]

Because of its weight and capacity, none of the Conestogas was drawn by fewer than four horses; though some had as many as eight, six was the usual number. These horses were mighty draft animals bred in the Conestoga valley area. Though their exact lineage is unknown, they are believed to be of the strain of the magnificent stallion Tamerlane and the three brood mares brought over by Penn. The horses stood from sixteen to seventeen and a half hands high and weighed over one hundred stone. Since the largest of the Conestogas was able to carry eight tons, powerful animals were needed to draw them. The Conestoga horse was one of the most notable and one of the few breeds this continent has produced. However, with the passing of the Conestoga wagon, this breed of mostly blacks or bays, with dappled greys becoming popular later, was permitted to become extinct.[7]

The horses were harnessed by heavy black bands with chains between each yoke. Over these harnesses were braces of bells or chimes which produced a harmonious rhythm as the horses jingled along. The reasons for the bells were three. They were attractive, and they warned approaching wagons, carts, horses and pedestrians that the great vehicle was lumbering on its way. Also, by the law of the road, if a wagon got stuck and was pulled out by the same number of horses of another teamster, the bells and housings went to the better

6 Tunis, 72.

7 Klees, 227. Horses were brought to "the new side of the world" by Europeans. Some came through the West Indies, Mexico, Canada. Others through New England. Earle D. Ross, in the *Dictionary of American History*, 1942, says: "Rhode Island developed one of the most distinctive and noted types of the period in the Narragansett pacer — a fast, easy-gaited saddle horse but one not suited for driving or draft purposes. In direct contrast was the famous Conestoga of the Pennsylvania German farmers. The product of selection and careful handling, these animals were distinguished for size, strength and endurance. The development of such a suitable draft type was in harmony with the more settled and advanced cultivation and husbandry that prevailed in this region." Volume III, 47.

outfit.[8] Or, if stuck in a mudhole or other such difficulty and the driver forced to appeal for help, the bells were the price the unfortunate teamster had to pay for rescue. It was understood that to the rescuer went the bells of the rescued wagon. This was a severe humiliation for a tough wagoner to accept. From this wearing of bells arose the expression "to be there with bells on," that is, to be on the Lancaster Pike, where the Conestoga ran, ready to advance, having experienced no trouble.[9]

The teamsters who drove these huge freight vehicles were for the most part a hard lot. They prided themselves on their manhood, on their ability to slug it out with other wagoners, and on their capacity for downing drink after drink of Monongahela whisky. Hard and tough, they slept out of doors in the summer and on tavern floors before the fire in the winter. They would patronize only certain taverns which catered to them specifically like modern truck stops.[10] The wagoners and their helpers were as colorful as their rigs: black leather boots, linsey pants, red flannel shirts, and broad-brimmed hats.[11] They characteristically smoked four-for-a-cent cigars, long, thin and villainous, produced by the Marsh factory in Wheeling, West Virginia, and first known as Conestogas. The label was soon corrupted and shortened to the application of the term "stogie" to any cigar.[12]

A full Conestoga wagon, huge horses, and driver would extend a distance of sixty feet when pulling a heavy load. This was quite a sight to see and hear, especially a train of a hundred or even fifty Conestoga wagons traveling the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road in the early days of the Republic.[13] The Conestoga rig rambled along quite audibly with its many bells jingling and its driver managing his team with a smartly cracking blacksnake whip and verbal commands: "gee" for the off side, or right, and "haw" for the near, left side.[14]

With the position of the sliding "lazy board" on the left, the driver became accustomed to driving his animals from the left. If he had a helper, the helper would sit on the left, near wheel horse. With an open road before him, the wagoner kept his horses in the center of the road. When he heard the jangle of an approaching rig, he

8 R. Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest Pioneer Period, 1815-1840* (Bloomington, 1951), 474-475.
9 Marjorie Tallman, *A Dictionary of American Folklore* (New York, 1959), 21.
10 Klees, 228.
11 Tunis, 72.
12 Tallman, 69-70.
13 Klees, 228.
14 Buley, 475.

moved his team off to the right with a flourish of reins, whip, and "gee," being careful not to sideswipe the other wagon. From this practice comes the American custom of driving on the right side of the road. The Conestoga wagoner did not think it too arrogant a change from the English fashion, but when he chose to drive on the right, he decided for himself and for everyone else as well; that is, when he decided to pull over at all. Since his wagon was a gigantic affair, all others were forced to give way. Those who could not, or would not, were unloaded and bodily picked up and pushed aside by everyone who was delayed, especially at a bottleneck in the road.[15]

With Pittsburgh rapidly developing as the "Gateway to the West" and population growing in Western Pennsylvania, the Conestoga wagon was used extensively. Within twenty-five years, by 1775, more than ten thousand Conestoga wagons made the trip to Philadelphia annually. Sometimes there were one hundred wagons in a single train. Fifty to a hundred such wagons bound for Philadelphia were to be found practically any day in the year on the Lancaster or the Reading road. Each huge Conestoga, crawling along at the rate of twelve to fifteen miles a day, would haul glass, pottery, linen, sugar, salt, tobacco, grain, flour, flaxseed, whisky, cider, fruit, charcoal, iron ore, and pig iron — anything the settlers and industrialists chose. The supplies that reached Washington at Valley Forge were trucked in by Conestoga. In the spring of 1778 a Conestoga, guarded by a company of Continental soldiers, brought $600,000 in silver, a loan from the French government, all the way from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to York, Pennsylvania. Year after year the Conestoga wagons increased in number until by 1830 there were nearly three thousand each day on the road from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh carrying land freight to the West.[16]

This number is not large when one considers the population living west of the Alleghenies. Pittsburgh, for instance, was the most important staging area for the westward advance into the Ohio and the Illinois country. By 1810 the small fort on the point where the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers merged to form the Ohio had gathered around it a sizable community of 4,768. Pittsburgh was noted as a metropolis of business and trade, the focal point of a region containing 210,000 people.[17]

Travelers of the day remarked about the conditions of the city of

15 Klees, 228.
16 Klees, 226.
17 Louis B. Wright, *Culture on the Moving Frontier* (Bloomington, 1955), 82.

Pittsburgh and the way trade was carried on from the wagons that brought produce, meat, and merchandise to the city. Fortescue Cuming, visiting Pittsburgh in 1808, remarked that "as a trading or manufacturing town, I think Pittsburgh for situation is not exceeded in the United States and that it bids fair to become the emporium of the centre of the federal union." [18] Another traveler, W. Bullock, noting the industry of the people and their application to making money, wrote:

> My first ramble on the morning after my arrival was to the market, at an early hour, where a novel and interesting sight presented itself. Several hundred waggons, tilted with white canvas, and each drawn by three or four horses, with a pole, in a similar manner to our coaches, were backed against the pavement, or footway, of the market-place, the tailboard, or flap of the waggon, turned down, so as to form a kind of counter, and convert the body of the carriage into a portable shop, in which were seated the owners, amidst the displayed produce of their farms; the whole having something of the appearance of an extensive encampment, arranged in perfect order. It was the first time I had seen an American market, and if I was surprised at the arrangement, I was much more so, at the prices of the articles, as well as at their superior quality.[19]

A consideration of some of the road conditions of the day will give a better understanding of the Conestoga wagon and its need, use and construction. The roads which the Pennsylvania German farmer had to travel when he went anywhere in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth were, with very few exceptions, very poor, terribly rough, extremely miry and boggy in places. Sometimes a boggy spot was improved by constructing over it a corduroy road which seldom lasted long. A considerable tardiness also was seen in the matter of building bridges; for many years any crossing of a small stream had to be done by fording, and larger streams by ferry. Consequently, before the use of macadam on the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike Road, 1794, the Conestoga had to be constructed to withstand very rough roads.[20] Its makers, therefore, built these freighters strong and heavy, and designed for them high wheels to travel over stumps, ruts, mud and streams.

So heavily constructed, the Conestoga was used primarily for freight. Its use as the primary means for transportation of settlers to the far West — California and Oregon — was limited by its huge bulk. Called the Pittsburgh wagon out West or the Hoosier wagon in Indiana, most of the early wagons on the Oregon Trail were

18 Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country* (Pittsburgh, 1810), in Reuben Thwaites, *Early Western Travels* (Cleveland, 1904), IV, 246.

19 W. Bullock, *Sketch of a Journey through the Western States . . . in 1827*, in Thwaites, XIX, 135.

20 Hulbert, 51-54.

Conestogas, but though the old freight wagon could stand the punishment of the trip, it required too many animals to haul it. Its curved body was difficult to build, hence expensive; those same curves, needed for cargo, were uncomfortable for passengers. The standard "prairie schooner" was used much more extensively out West since it was an ordinary farm wagon with extraordinarily sturdy wheels and very much lighter, consequently much less expensive.[21]

Nevertheless, the old freighter had seen much use in its day in the Allegheny and Northwestern Territory areas. Likened to a great ship of the merchant marine because of its bowed body and gracefully curved canvas top, so much like the sail of a ship, the Conestoga doggedly plowed through the narrow muddy roads under the strain of horses and the curse of a wagoner to deliver the coal, produce, grain and merchandise of a thriving agricultural and industrial area. The cities had to be fed and the farmers had the means to feed them. The Conestoga wagon provided the link between the farmer and the city.

Years passed firmly entrenching this symbiotic relationship in Pennsylvania. But, like all good things, the Conestoga came to a gradual end. Its nemesis was its expense and lack of speed. The canal was introduced in Pennsylvania and provided a cheaper means of transportation with greater speed. The Conestoga could little match these two factors. Pennsylvania was honeycombed with canals soon after their introduction in the early 1800's. Along with the canals came another death blow to the extensive use of the Conestoga — the railroad. The Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, better known as the Reading, became the leading railroad by 1842, robbing the Conestoga of two important clients: the coal hauling industry and the Reading agricultural area shipping.[22] As more major markets were supplied with greater speed and less expense, the Conestoga gradually began to fade as a major factor in transportation since it was in no position to compete. It was seen less and less, eventually servicing only rural areas.

The Conestoga was the greatest of covered wagons and as such has become a symbol of early Americana. Hardly an historical report on early transportation is printed without mention of the mighty Conestoga. Though little used in the settling of the far West, it has captured the imagination of the American people as seen in the painter, Frederic Remington. Despite its commonplace use as a heavy freight

21 Tunis, 116.
22 Klees, 229-233.

wagon, the Conestoga has an atmosphere of romance about it, placing it high upon the list of prairie schooners. Continued, popular use of the dependable Conestoga has endeared it to the spirit of America. Compare it for instance with the fabled stage coach of the West, the Concord coach used extensively by Wells Fargo. The Concord proved its worth and retired leaving behind it an image which will probably never die. Likewise is the impression of the Conestoga. Furthermore, compare this romanticized image to the Mississippi River Boat, the Yankee Clipper and the Pullman Coach. A great deal of effort would be required to wrench these romantic notions from the American imagination. These very names, as the Conestoga, have ceased to be mere words, but have become symbols, ideas, ways of life, legend, Americana.

To this list others may be added. Few native Americans should be ignorant of the legends conjured up around the coonskin cap, the long rifle, the cotton gin, the log cabin, the steamboat, McCormick's reaper, the Colt 45, and the little red schoolhouse. Constant, popular usage has firmly imbedded these cultural items in American minds. Even today comparable images are being formed: the Model T Ford, the vintage biplane of the First World War, the Stanley Steamer, the Spirit of St. Louis, the Jeep, the Flying Fortress, the PT Boat, the Greyhound Bus, the subway. These constituted the first and last word in their respective fields. Their popularity resulted from usage by Americans. For every practical invention that meets the demands of a fast-moving, technological people, legend will place it in the consequent history of that very people. So have these, and the Conestoga, mass-produced but effective, caught the imagination of the United States.

In the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, as in many other museums, is an old worn-out Conestoga,[23] holding its own in a room of early Americana. Fenced by a little rail, this juggernaut of a hundred years ago fills the imagination with wonder. What was it like to cross Pennsylvania in that lumbering, springless wagon? It would have

23 The Conestoga wagon in the Carnegie Institute (Museum) of Pittsburgh is believed to have been built in Philadelphia about 1864. It was the property of the Swearingen family and is understood to have been used to carry goods between Pittsburgh and Clinton, Pennsylvania, in the period immediately following the Civil War. There is a legend to the effect that it was shown in parades of the political campaign of 1872, when U. S. Grant was elected President a second time. Records of the Carnegie Museum indicate that the wagon was given by Mrs. J. Shillito. Dimensions are: Width of bed, 3'10"; length of bed, 12'; length or diameter of rear wheel, 5'; front wheel, 3'6"; width of tires, 1¾"; number of bows or stays, 8; overall length when in use, 13' plus.

taken many long hours and hard work to travel the space of a few automobile minutes. How different yet similar to the huge, fast-moving trucks which have taken its place! Now the curious visitor sees a relatively small, unprepossessing wagon, divorced from its natural environment and employment — he wonders why he is impressed. But the Conestoga was a mighty giant in its day, and its image is real in the history of America.